

Undergraduate Student Perspective

A Pre-Med Graduate's Gap Year of Community Immersion: Finding a Greater Purpose

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I. Introduction

My eyes startle awake at the sound of my first alarm. 6:05 a.m. The sky is still dark, but I can already hear the lively bustle of my neighborhood on their way to work below my apartment in Central Los Angeles. I begrudgingly get myself out of bed and prepare for a full day of school. This is a familiar routine. Except this time, I'm not going as a student but as an educator.

Some people seem to have absolute clarity as to what careers they want to pursue while others may feel lost in the sea of possibilities. I belonged to the latter group. While I didn't know the exact passions I wanted to pursue, growing up, I knew the things that I absolutely did NOT want to do – and that was anything involving math and/or science. After barely scraping past basic high school chemistry and biology, I was relieved to know that once I entered college I would not have to meet those formidable foes again. As a lover of music, humanities, and the arts, I imagined that my life and career would be separated from science, which I thought was limited to the world of test tubes, pipettes, and moles. However, I was in for a surprise.

Having a close family member with a severe mental illness, I entered college with some interest in finding a field that would make mental health care more accessible given the extreme shortage of services in my area. In my freshman year, through a mandatory career planning class for psychology majors, I discovered the field of psychiatry. Its ability to holistically treat patients with both psychotherapy and medication immediately piqued my interest, and it became a field I wanted to explore. After realizing that this career would require a medical degree, despite my earlier aversion to science, I decided to take an introductory

chemistry course and see how I fared. I was surprised to find that I not only was capable of learning science, but that it also was a field that sparked curiosity and excited me.

By my senior year, I had completed all the necessary coursework and testing to apply for medical school. However, having followed the tight trajectory of a pre-medical track, I felt the need for some space to seriously reflect on this career path, while also permitting myself to explore other interests. Instead of jumping into a medical or graduate program immediately, I decided to take at least one gap year working. While the pressure to start my career was something that initially frightened me, this gap year has been the best gift of time for reflecting, exploring new hobbies, diversifying my professional skill set, and gaining clarity and motivation for a future career in healthcare.

II. A Day in the Life of my City Year

I currently work in the sunny city of Los Angeles with an educational non-profit called City Year. In this national Americorps-sponsored program, thousands of volunteers are placed in high-need public schools across the country to serve as near-peer mentors for students in elementary, middle, and high schools. I chose to serve with City Year because I was drawn to its vision that all children have equal potential for success and deserve a more equal opportunity towards the resources and support necessary for their growth and development. Also, if I wanted to serve low-income populations in urban communities in the future, it was important that I spend time immersing myself in such a community. I am proudly serving at Belmont High School in the Westlake area, where I continuously gain inspiration from my students and am learning the importance and power of community building.

My average day at school begins promptly at 7:15 a.m. After going through the team announcements for the day, we go outside to greet students to get them excited for the school day. This is one of my favorite parts of the day because I love watching students enter school with a smile! Throughout the day we provide in-class support and plan one-on-one teaching activities to help strengthen our students' foundational skills in reading and math. While the focus of our organization is academic, we also serve to support their socio-emotional wellbeing and growth. Thus, we not only assist students with classwork and after school enrichment programs, but oftentimes, we also get to have conversations about their jobs, families, and the stress and joy of being in love for the first time. After a long day, at 5:15pm, we gather as a team to share our triumphs and difficulties of the day before parting and getting ready for the next day.

In the past eight months of service, I have had the honor of getting to know students like Pedro [name has been replaced to protect identity], a vibrant tenth grader. When we first started the year, he refused to work on any assignments during class. After spending more time with him, I learned how he has been living and working in Los Angeles without his parents for the past year. While I can't do much to change his personal situation, I try to make the classroom a welcoming environment so that he feels supported, encouraged, and accountable while at school. I am excited to say that through hours of practice spent in the classroom and after school, we both celebrated him passing all of his classes last semester.

Like Pedro, most of our students at Belmont move to Los Angeles from Central America with the hopes of creating a better life for themselves and

their families. Many come here alone to this foreign country where they do not speak the language and are often not accepted by mainstream society. I often feel hesitant sharing stories of my students because I realize that these are not my stories to tell. However, Pedro is more than a story. He is a valuable member of and asset to our community. Acknowledging his history is not to gain sympathy, but rather done with the hope that there is a personal stake in very real, human lives. Taking time to immerse myself in this particular community, I am learning that we are all interconnected. As my service year continues, my goal is to remind my students of their importance and encourage them to become the best advocate for themselves. I hope to be the best cheerleader I can for my students and let them know that they have someone supporting them in their corner.

III. Seeing the Bigger Picture

During my time taking biochemistry at university, I was intrigued by some life lessons it taught me. In the study of metabolism, I learned how the human body is one of the most efficient machines in the entire universe. The interconnectivity of metabolic pathways made me realize the intricate nature of how the body works. It depends on the function of each unique part; nothing can function on its own. My brief tour of the metabolism taught me more than just enzyme names and pathways. It radically changed the way I think about treatment and health delivery. Just like our physical bodies, in order to thrive, human beings must rely on community.

I now see that effective health treatment requires more than just looking at the symptoms and genetic history. It also requires an awareness of how

an individual's relationships and living conditions are connected to the community to which they belong. This interconnectivity also made me realize that when one individual struggles, the entire community shares the weight. Thus, it makes sense to acknowledge and advocate for those who may not be given equal resources to care for themselves.

Many times people who go into community service may come from places of privilege with a deficiency-centered outlook where we want to support a "struggling" neighbor. In my time of service, I have had first-hand encounters with injustices in educational practices that favor some neighborhoods while denying others with basic resources. While it is true that my school receives much less support, I am learning that our practice of labeling (e.g., use of deficit-based language like "achievement gaps") significantly undermines student potential and ignores the larger structural issues. I am convinced that how we label others determines how we will treat them. I hope that we shift towards asset-based language (e.g. "opportunity gaps"), which acknowledges the inequities while respecting the dignity of our students and the community. With this shift, I see my community as an asset rather than a burden. If one takes the time to engage, my community offers strength and beauty. When walking around my school community in Westlake, one will find that the streets are full of hardworking individuals who celebrate and share their vibrant culture and strong sense of family values. I have learned that through this year of service, I receive more than I give and am continuously growing through the support in my community.

IV. Gaining a Greater Purpose

The gap year has radically changed my outlook on a future career in healthcare in a number of

unexpected ways. One of these realizations is that I need to be intentional about engaging with diverse communities. Living in Los Angeles, I have had the opportunity to be exposed and learn from multiple cultural groups every day. This has been a shift from my previous experiences living in the bubble of my college campus in Indiana. It has taught me that diversity is much more than representation. Diversity is the celebration and acknowledgement of those from all walks of life that may be completely different from my own. The beauty of seeing my students from different countries interact and connect has shown me that diversity teaches us to focus on unity and our need for each other rather than focusing on our differences.

I have also discovered more about what motivates me to do the work I do. I have often heard the phrase, "Knowledge is power." In addition to power, knowledge is also responsibility. In my case, acquiring knowledge requires me to think about how and for whom I will use it. I want to use it for community building, as I learn more about what that means. These thoughts are new realizations that I have been spurred by my unique gap year experience.

I encourage those reading to take time before you commit to a career and try a gap year. Anyone in any field or level can engage in meaningful community work. By taking a non-traditional route and working in education, I have had the opportunity to broaden my perspective and learn that the impact of what we do as researchers, educators, and life-long learners extends far past the domains of our individual sectors.

V. Acknowledgements

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